

Ajahn Santacitta 11-17-2010



Ajahn Santacitta was born in Austria in 1958. After graduating in hotel management she studied cultural anthropology at Vienna University, specializing in dance and ritual. During her studies at university she worked in avant-garde dance theatre as a performer and costume designer. In the early 1980s, Ajahn Santacitta was a founding member of a community of ecologists, artists and social workers near Vienna, which is still thriving today.

Always looking for more depth and meaningful direction, she met her first teacher, Ajahn Buddhadasa, in 1988 and lived for several years in Thailand before moving to Amaravati Monastery in 1992. After becoming an *anagārikā* in 1993, she spent part of her training with the *mae chi* (nuns) of Wat Nong Pah Pong and other branch monasteries in Thailand. In 1998, she received *siladhara* ordination with Ajahn Sumedho as her preceptor and teacher.

Currently Ajahn Santacitta resides at Aloka Vihara in San Francisco, she teaches in the wider Bay Area and other parts of the U.S.

Ajahn Santacitta spoke to us of the emerging and changing roles of men and women in Buddhist monastic communities.

*There has always been a diversity of views in our communities regarding how to live as monks and nuns in the West. Some feel strongly that mixed-gender communities are unwise, going against Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) historical experience and are bound to lead to pain, particularly considering the unequal conventional structures we must work within. Others, both monks and nuns, believe strongly in the positive value of mixed communities and don't want much division.*

*The Theravada tradition traces its origin to Gotama Buddha, whose teachings are recorded in the Pali Canon. One part of this canon is the Vinaya Pitaka, which outlines the regulations and procedures of the monastic community. Thus, for the ordination of a monastic to be recognized as authentic, it must conform to the standards laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka. Anyone who receives Theravada ordination also agrees to follow the guidelines of the Vinaya, rather than the changing social standards of the world.*

*Over the 2,500 years of the Buddhist monastic tradition, there has sometimes arisen uncertainty about procedures or interpretation of the texts. A range of scholarly commentaries, as well as personal opinion regarding what is the 'correct' practice of Vinaya has thus grown over the years. Together with this, there are also the prevailing views of senior and learned elders, who can be called upon to offer some experienced wisdom if uncertainty arises. The great strength of the Theravada tradition is that it preserves probably the oldest record of the Buddha's teachings, which can then be called upon as the authoritative reference.*

*Saranaloka Foundation was the first trust that had been established with the specific intention of supporting nuns of the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho. Our heartfelt wish in coming here, was to establish a training monastery for nuns within our lineage.*

*The vision of the Saranaloka Foundation was to support the expansion of possibilities for women in the west to pursue the dhamma in a monastic form and to deepen their practice for the benefit of all. The original form of our vision was to support a women's monastic community for siladhara in the Ajahn Chah lineage.*

*However, we are living in an historic period where the unfolding of full participation and ordination for women is happening in most world religions. Our community is no exception: When we came here for the first time in January 2008, our intention was to look into establishing a training monastery for siladhara. As three sisters who have trained in the UK monasteries for about 18 years, we each felt ready to enter a space of new growth, inwardly and outwardly. Meanwhile in our own communities in the UK, the response to the international attention on the position of women and the feminine in Buddhism, was to reaffirm a conservative stance.*

*Going forward, we will continue to offer support to the siladhara visiting and teaching in the United States. In addition, after extensive research, discussion, and thoughtful consideration, the Board of Directors has decided to expand its vision to support the Aloka Vihara nuns in their pursuit of bhikkhuni ordination, which is not possible for siladhara.*

*The ready availability in the US of bhikkhuni ordination, the ordination given by the Buddha, offers us a new platform for the establishment of a training monastery for women. Taking all these things into consideration, we have come to the decision to move towards taking bhikkhuni ordination to provide a stronger container to pass on to other women. In keeping with the 'Five Points' we will take leave of the Ajahn Chah / Ajahn Sumedho lineage in order to later receive full ordination. We have already informed the elders of our community of this intention and will formally ask forgiveness and take leave of our community in April 2011, when all the nuns and other elders will be gathered at Amaravati. We recognize that this is a huge step and truly want to honor all that we have received over the years."*

In the Buddhist Monastic Code, the *Vinaya*, there are 227 rules for monks and 317 rules for nuns. In many cultures and religions, there are a greater number of constraints for women than there are for men, which result from the underlying belief that women are somehow morally, ethically, and physically weaker than men. In Buddhism, the additional rules are for the protection of women. Coming from a culture in which women were property, the Buddha established rules to protect the nuns against oppression, rape, exploitation, and from falling back into cultural habits (e.g., serving and waiting on men). The Buddha broke with the caste system of his society as well as with traditional gender roles, but not without concern. His mother had asked to be ordained three times before the Buddha agreed. The Buddha compensated for his departing from tradition by establishing guidelines for the monastic community that would protect them from backlash. The Buddha's approach was to integrate with cultures, not clash with them. He felt it was important to communicate and reach people, using whatever language, analogies, or cultural values were relevant.

The times of patriarchy seem to be coming to an end. Rather than taking from the planet what we can, whenever we wish, we should look to the nurturing character of women to restore the balance and help save the human race, and the other life we share this planet with.

Role change is different and difficult. There is sadness in leaving the old for the new, but compassion is not just going on with what people want or are used to. Intention is the key to change. The Noble 8-Fold Path is about action and engagement.

The West Coast is a fertile ground for women to become ordained. The more women that are ordained, the better it is for the planet. Women's values are to be respected, not just the traditional values of a patriarchal society.

We want to make a difference, and not be crushed by crisis, even though it may overwhelm the intellect. Rational man can be driven mad by the complexity of the world. We can't rely on rational man; we must be one with intuitive man.

Meditation helps us develop the capacity to pull back from rational man. Meditation can provide us with a skilful means to balance ourselves. Meditation promotes change because it makes you more aware.

All things are processes. If you look at a chair, or a picture, at first you see a "thing". But if you look deeper, using a microscope, you begin to see the process. Meditation is about letting go of assumptions and false beliefs. Meditation is not for gaining knowledge of something not here, but the discovery of what is already there.